

Jackie Kashian

The woman behind "The Dork Forest" and "Joke Machine" talks about her addiction to standup and giving cred to female nerds

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Jackie Kashian makes no bones about where she stands on people and politics. It's the backbone of her comedic presence.

"I'm an Anarchic Socialist," she says. "I don't think anyone would be surprised to find out what my politics are. I am clearly a supporter of the common man."

Kashian's a nationally touring comic who has built an empire of sardonic, edgy comedy and thatched it with "The Dork Forest," an hour long podcast that she has hosted for the past eight years.

Kashian also has her own half-hour special on Comedy Central, she was a semi-finalist on Last Comic Standing and has recorded "This American Life" with Ira Glass for NPR.

Her first time on stage was born from heckling the late Sam Kinison. In 1985, a very drunk Kashian heckled Kinison in Madison, Wisc. Just three weeks later she participated in her first open mike on the same stage. Now nearly 30 years later, she has crafted a comedic style that is witty, sassy, genuine and thoroughly entertaining.

She had me in stitches as we spoke about her own dorky obsessions, her love of standup and her upcoming shows at the Helium Comedy Club at the end of August.

I caught her via phone as she was preparing for "Joke Machine" with her friend and fellow comedian, Erin Foley, at a coffee shop in L.A., Calif.

Jackie Kashian: Joke Machine is when you run bits by people. You meet with a fellow comic and you run some premises by and then they punch it up and then they run some premises and then you punch it up. The only rule of Joke Machine is you can't say, "That's not funny." There's always something there.

Sue Zalokar: Critique is good. You hone lots of skills.

J.K.: And you get to practice your bits on somebody.

S.Z.: Is this your creation or is this a universal comedic tool, "Joke Machine?"

J.K.: We named it "Joke Machine" — Maria Bamford and I. We consider it a game, even though it's deadly serious. It's very fun. All comics should do it with the friends that they write with.

You come to an agreement — like my buddy Auggie Smith, who is from Portland. He likes to do it timed. You do five minutes — everything that everybody comes up with regarding that joke belongs to the comic who has the premise. So you have to go in knowing who's going to leave with the punchlines. You can't say something funny and then go, "Oh wait, I want to keep that."

S.Z.: You love standup.



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LUKE FONTANA

J.K.: I do love it. It's the best. I started when I was 19. I was doing it for so long and it's 25 years, if I count the '80s as one year, and I tend to.

When I first started doing it — when you first start anything — you're never any good at it, but blessedly you don't know. And you're like, "I don't care if I'm bad at it, I'm going to keep doing it."

It was like heroin. It was so addictive from the first time I did it.

S.Z.: What about it is addictive to you?

J.K.: I think just having a voice — just being heard. Even if the things I was saying were just shocking and getting that kind of reaction.

When you first start doing stand up comedy, you mostly do shock jock stuff, just trying to get a reaction out of people. And then you figure out material that is very much you, that is the kind of stuff that you will write. You'll put your own stamp on (the material). I tend to write more of a storytelling style.

S.Z.: Tragically, Robin Williams took his own life recently after living with addiction and depression for quite some time. It is ironic that someone who brought so much joy and laughter into the world suffered from such debilitating illness. Do you any comment about his death?

J.K.: His great influence on me was that he always reminded me to be grateful for the sheer joy of being on stage. I met him, maybe, three times. He was always an advocate of standup. He loved doing it and loved watching it. He was a good guy to be around at a comedy show. Which is another great way to influence comics — hell,

people. Leading by the example of courtesy and support.

I've been thinking a lot about his recurring fight with addiction and depression and think of how much I benefit from a — relatively — straightforward chemical setup in my head. I get depressed, like everyone, but it's never for more than six to eight months at a crack — and, maybe, every four or five years. What I really fear is the depression swooping down and killing you before you realize how depressed you are. Remember that life mends itself in the next moment. In the next day. Sometimes it takes a bit.

I will miss his light and joy and I wish him peace. For the rest of us I remind myself of the advice from my incredibly, self-centered parents. In my father's words, "Just be happy and do something nice for yourself. It doesn't matter if it makes other people happy. Better you think of you."

S.Z.: You tour 25 weeks a year. That seems like a lot. How long have you been doing that?

J.K.: Yeah. It's been even more than that the last two years. It is a lot, I'm gone three to four days a week, home three to four days a week.

S.Z.: Kind of dreamy, really.

J.K.: It can be. I have a lot of frequent flyer miles. The worst part of it is being tired from the travel. The best part of it is the new audiences everywhere.

I just did North Carolina. I'd never been to North Carolina. I'm going to Ohio this week. I've never been there.

S.Z.: I was born in Columbus, Ohio.

See KASHIAN, page 5